past sins

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by PrinceDarcy

Summary

It’s one of his earliest memories, a clear spot in a stretch fogged over by time.
He is four years old when he first faces how it feels to end another creature's life.

Companion piece to Graham Rising.

It's one of his earliest memories, a clear spot in a stretch fogged over by time. He lacks even second hand recollection of most of the details that surround the singular occurrence, having had no one to refresh them in his mind past the point they were what could be considered distant, but the event itself is vivid as if it were only yesterday.

He is four years old, he has spent an unfortunate amount of time in the car with his father, he has a recent paper cut on his left forefinger which still stings, though it's closed up, and he has only just gotten away from a crowd of relatives in a musty old house with a group of a few other children to go play in the woods. A couple teenagers head the pack, twin girls whose names are among the few details that have faded into obscurity, and there are four other children between about six and ten years old.

They are among the first people to call him "Will" instead of William, but they have also abandoned him to build a fort. He's easily lost track of at this age, small and generally silent if he isn't crying. The twins made some assurances that there isn't anything more dangerous than deer roaming around during the day, and even without that he isn't afraid of the woods. He's content wandering through the trees with his cut finger in his mouth, well aware that they're probably going to notice he's gone eventually. He doesn't stray far from where they headed to make their fort.

His interest is attracted by the smell of blood in the air, and he looks around for the source. Some small reddish lump catches his eye and he scrambles over to investigate, electing (away from the eyes of his father, who would say he is too old to do so) to crawl all fours for better maneuverability.

The lump turns out to be an injured bird, bleeding from gashes all over it. He's seen injured birds before, though his memories do not provide him with context for that knowledge. He also recognizes that one of the cats that he had seen in the house is likely responsible.

Most notably, he realizes, surprising for his age (though that he is only four at the time is something he's quite certain of,) that if the bird is not *dead,* it is dying. He touches it gently and feels that it is still breathing, if only just.

Words come to mind that he can not place the source of; *animals that are dying are taken out behind the barn and shot so they don't have to suffer.* There is no barn and no gun present, but he, somehow, understands the basic meaning: kill them quickly so they don't suffer.

He doesn't hear a few pairs of feet shuffling behind him as he finds the biggest rock he can pick up in his little child hands, unceremoniously crushing the bird with it. He's planning to say a prayer for it and cover it up with some leaves in lieu of burying it when one of the twin girls screams behind him.

"You killed it! You killed it!" she shrieks when he turns around to look at her, then down at his red-flecked self. Blood and dirt are on him and his hands but he shakes his head anyway. He is silent, even though he thinks to tell her that it was dying anyway.

Some of the other children sniffle and the calmer twin comes near, raising her hand like she's going to slap him, when his father appears.

"Th'hell is this?" his father asks, eyes flaring as he looks from the twin girls to the scene of carnage. Will puts his bloody hands behind his back.

The more vocal of the twins points at the rock with the bird's corpse under it, giving another exclamation of "He killed it!"

Will's father turns his sharp eyes on him again, on his dirty knees and bloody front.

"We saw him," the other twin says, and it's at that point he notices that despite her calmness, she is very, very pale. "He took the rock and he hit it and now it's dead."

"Show me your hands, boy," his father demands, and he complies, looking down at his shoes.

"For *God's sake,* Willy!" he spits, and grabs Will by the shoulder to bring him back to the house. "Ev'ryone's gonna see you lookin' like this, you understand?"

He nods. Then he starts crying.

He's scrubbed as clean as possible in the bathroom after being lead through a crowd of gawking relatives like a sideshow attraction. Several Grahams go white as clean bedsheets when they see him - and *hear* him, because he doesn't shut up for a good while - but no one says a word. Apparently the owner of the house has a child or grandchild close enough to his age that he's set up in a t-shirt and pair of overalls only a size too big for him while his own clothes get washed.

There is still blood under his fingernails when he's brought back out into the dining room to be sent off to sit in the corner with a picture book he's bored with until he and his father can leave. He can see into the living room just enough to see the twins sitting on the couch, a woman who must be their mother for how much she looks like them dabbing one of their faces with a towel.

His father, he thinks, is about to berate him again, when a man with neat hair and big green eyes (that in Will's childhood memory look like two billiard balls stuck in his head) approaches the both of them, pale as many of the rest of the relatives.

He takes Will's father aside but stays, likely not to his knowledge, too close to remain unheard, and casting a glance quite directly at Will's still bloody fingernails, says in a half-hearted whisper, "John, the Devil's done touched that boy of yours."

He remembers little, if anything, else. He remembers a distinct lack of guilt, despite a primitive awareness that it should not be absent. He remembers trying to explain months later why he'd done it, only to be told to "shut up 'bout that stupid bird" by his father.

He remembers a few years later, a neighbor's cat being found dead in the woods when he had been nowhere near it. He remembers his father looking at him furiously— and almost curiously.

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